

Title: What does “Democratic Society” mean? Strategies to motivate students to participate in discussions and acquire study habits for success.

Researcher’s Name: Dr. Naome Soleil

Name of Delivery Organization: Northlands College, La Ronge

Contact for Further Information: nsol2009@gmail.com

Summary of Outcomes:

The interventions I used were successful with 6 of the 7 students who were open to consistent effort, eager to learn difficult reading material, and self-motivated. Four of the 7 students went on to university or other post-secondary education. A year later, two students worked a year and have applied to start university in September 2012. The student who did not participate in the project returned to school in 2012 for more Adult 12 upgrading.

Abstract: Seven Aboriginal adult students participated in a research-in-practice project to determine if interventions to improve comprehension, vocabulary building, and writing skills would result in an overall average of greater than 70% in Sociology 160. The SIAST credit course requires participation and daily homework to understand and apply key concepts and requires advanced writing skills for essays written in APA style format. Students without Grade 12 writing skills, plus limited exposure to mainstream society and no prior knowledge of sociological theories, concepts, and discourse had resisted class discussion and homework the previous year because the language created barriers to understanding. I added pre-reading key concepts, writing exercises, and chapter quizzes as pivotal interventions to motivate class participation, homework and study habits.

A pre-test was given to assess comprehension and writing skills. Students were asked to read a short article from the text, answer 3 questions and write a paragraph summary. Results of the pre-test showed that 5 of the 7 students had difficulty understanding the main ideas in the article and writing had significant mechanical errors. Three students did not attempt to write a paragraph summary. Two students used a dictionary while reading the text, responded effectively to the 3 questions, and wrote a summary with fewer than 10 errors. Six of the 7 students responded positively to interventions to make the difficult language accessible, develop writing skills using new vocabulary in context, and study for quizzes at the end of each chapter. One student withdrew from the project after the first quiz. Five students achieved marks greater than 70%. One student had difficulty applying key concepts in essay questions but achieved a final mark in the high 60s. The student who withdrew early in the project did not pre-read the text or complete

homework and barely passed the course. The data showed a direct correlation between scores on quizzes to scores on the final exam.

- Questions:**
- 1) Will chapter quizzes of key concepts raise comprehension of reading material, develop study skills, and improve writing skills?
 - 2) Will students use oral and written feedback on chapter quizzes to apply sociological language in essay assignments and exam questions?
 - 3) Will students attain a minimum of 70% after applying interventions?

The Interventions:

- 1) Students were asked to pre-read key concepts at the beginning of each chapter and preview sections of the text assigned for homework.
- 2) Students wrote chapter quizzes comprised of 10 multiple-choice questions and 1 or 2 short answer paragraph questions based on key concepts.
- 3) Students participated in roundtable discussions in class based on homework and assigned readings of the text.
- 4) Students practiced note-taking and wrote new vocabulary in sentences.

To apply study skills, students came to class prepared for discussion and created flashcards that they used to reinforce learning and quiz each other. To improve writing skills and increase vocabulary, students looked up 10 new words for homework, wrote definitions, discussed words in class next day, and wrote sentences using the words in context. Students received a mark and feedback on sentences. Problems in reading comprehension and errors in writing were reviewed as a group in class. Quizzes at the end of each chapter tested retention and understanding of key concepts. After each quiz, students corrected errors and received oral and written feedback from the instructor.

Note that students participated in the project voluntarily and marks assigned to the quizzes and writing exercises were to indicate to the students what material in the chapter they knew and what material required more review. No marks from the RiP project were included in their overall course mark for Sociology 160.

The Findings:

- 1) The 3 students who took non-credit courses with me from the beginning of the program had established a bond and showed greater confidence in discussions, initially, whereas the other 4 students increased their participation and confidence over time.
- 2) Roundtable discussions required that everyone came to class prepared to ask and answer questions and, as a result, created a shared learning experience.
- 3) One student asked the first day of the course, “What does a democratic society mean?” This student helped others ask questions, and based on this question, I initiated experiential activities to make new information more relevant and accessible to non-mainstream adults.
- 4) The 6 students who participated in the project became a cohesive group which stimulated cooperative learning.
- 5) Studying for and taking chapter quizzes stimulated good-natured competition and contributed to a positive class climate.
- 6) Responses on the quizzes revealed areas that needed further teaching and discussion.
- 7) Marks on chapter quizzes generally reflected learning and retention on the final exam.
- 8) Prior to using quizzes as an intervention, the 7 students preferred to work alone on homework, so an unanticipated outcome was the camaraderie that developed.
- 9) Five of the 7 students formed study groups for the mid-term and final exams.
- 10) Five out of 7 students achieved greater than 70% in Sociology 160.

Reflections On or Implications for Practice:

The project improved my teaching strategies and fostered in me a commitment to create materials to empower students through roundtable discussions and increase students' engagement, comprehension, and retention of new concepts and vocabulary.

The students responded well to experiential activities that turned dry textbook learning into active learning and questioning about how mainstream society and the dominant culture operate both positively and negatively in relations of status and power.

Positive responses on a student questionnaire affirmed that quizzes reinforced study skills and retention of material. Results of quizzes highlighted areas I needed to review. The project stimulated a dynamic learning environment through experiential activities, field experiments, discussions, and study groups.

In my reflections a year later, I realize that the students need to feel safe and respect each other as a group in order to create the openness we all enjoyed during this project. The interventions I used were successful with 6 of the 7 students who were open to consistent effort, eager to learn difficult reading material, and self-motivated. Four of the 7 students went on to university or other post-secondary education. A year later, two students worked a year and have applied to start university in September 2012. The student who did not participate in the project returned to school in 2012 for more Adult 12 upgrading.

I have since used quizzes in other courses as a method to improve study skills with moderate success; however, not all students are receptive to commit to consistent study habits, or they have personal resistances and circumstances that impede learning.

When a project is successful, it is easy to assume the same interventions will be equally successful with another group of students. From my experience with the chapter quizzes, I learned that it is worth trying methods that have worked well in the past, but on a cautionary note, remain open to new research-in-practice projects to respond to each group of students who come with different needs, abilities, lived experiences, and reasons for being in school.